

# Treasure hunters

*They're more than geeks with gadgets — they're digital scavengers and they're called geocachers*

By Kim Lyons

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Four-year-old Cierra Wellington tread confidently through the woods in South Park on a recent evening until she came to a large, decaying tree lying on its side.

She peered inside. "I found it, Dad!" she cried.

"It" was a plastic bucket called a cache, with trinkets, plastic toys, a log book and a pen inside.

Cierra's tracking instincts were helped along by her father, Jim's, \$300 GPS receiver. The Wellingtons, of Finleyville, are deep into geocaching — a hobby whose enthusiasts use GPS devices to track and find hidden items.

GPS stands for Global Positioning System, a network of 24 satellites that orbit the Earth. Originally designed for the military by the Department of Defense, GPS signals can be picked up anywhere in the world by GPS receivers, which cost from \$90 to upward of \$600.



HEIDI MURRIN/TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Cierra Wellington (right), 4, of Finleyville, and her father, Jim (blue shirt), discuss which items they should trade for while geocaching in the woods of South Park. Their friend, Evan Rector, 4, of Whitehall, and his father, Tom, also participated in the hunt.

"I like it for the adventure — I go places I'd never normally go," Jim Wellington said. He takes Cierra and his son Logan, 2, along as often

as he can. "They love it. Whenever I put my shoes on, they ask if Daddy's going walking in the woods." He got into geocaching

about two years ago when he saw a feature about it on a travel show. In April, he completed his 100th find.

"I like finding the places

— waterfalls and forests — as much as finding the caches," he said.

Geocaching, the hobby (or sport, depending upon whom you ask), was born in 2000, when President Clinton ordered the end of government encryption of GPS signals. Before May 1, 2000, non-military receivers were only able to detect signals about 300 feet away. But when the military restrictions were lifted, anyone with a GPS receiver was able to track a location within a few feet.

According to Geocaching.com, within a few days of the presidential order, a GPS enthusiast hid the first cache in the woods of Oregon and posted the coordinates online, inviting others to look for it.

In September of 2000, Jeremy Irish, a programmer for a failing dot-com founded Geocaching.com, compiling all the random geocache sites into one.

"That really made it take off as a hobby," said local geocacher David O'Connell of Sewickley. "Eventually he made it into a full-time business with geocachers all over the world."

## Caching on

A new hobby — or sport, to some — called geocaching, makes use of a Global Positioning System, or GPS, to navigate various locations all over the world. The device allows enthusiasts to find hidden items by tracking signals from a network of 24 satellites which orbit the Earth.

### Up/down buttons:

- Selects options on pages and menus
- Zooms in and out on the map page

### LCD display with backlight

### Enter/mark button:

- Confirms data entry or menu selections
- Displays options on main pages
- Pressing and holding button activates the "Mark Waypoint" function



THE ETREX OPERATES ON TWO AA BATTERIES.

## Operating the eTrex

The eTrex GPS is just one of many popular receivers currently being used. It can be operated by the information found on its five main display screens. Four are shown below:

- Menu**  
The menu lists the options needed to begin Geocaching.
- Mark waypoint**  
Waypoints are locations that can be saved in memory as destinations to navigate to later.
- Map**  
The map display shows current landmarks.
- Pointer**  
An arrow shows the direction to the destination waypoint.

## Into the woods

Tom Rector of Whitehall and his son Evan, 4, joined the Wellingtons in South Park. Rector and Wellington met via geocaching and often make treks together.

On this evening, the Wellingtons were tracking a cache that Rector had hidden. The Sunny Slopes Cache, as he named it, was posted on Geocaching.com under Rector's nickname, Medic005 — he's a paramedic — with the longitude and latitude, and an encrypted clue: "70 feet from the Red." He rated the terrain two stars out of five, and rated the difficulty in finding the cache at one star.

A compass on Wellington's GPS receiver pointed the way and indicated the distance as Cierra got closer. She was delighted to find the cache — a 50-caliber ammunition can — with crayons